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Mr J Hartley
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Hartley

Ofsted 2013 14 survey inspection programme: schools' use of alternative provision

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of staff and students, during my visit on 13 and 14 November 2013 to look at the school's use of alternative provision. During the visit I met with senior leaders who coordinate the alternative provision, examined a range of documents and met with two groups of students. I also visited Forest Hall School, which is a partner school in the Uttlesford Consortium, and observed the teaching of work-related courses in both schools.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text without their consent.

This letter briefly summarises our discussion at the end of the visit.

Strengths of this aspect of the school's work

- The school has joined with three other secondary schools to form the Uttlesford Consortium which provides work-related courses on two of the schools' sites and at a local college. This arrangement is an effective way of extending the range of courses on offer for those students who benefit from learning in a practical way. It utilises resources within the schools rather than drawing upon external sources of alternative educational provision.
- Courses currently offered are: introduction to the hair and beauty sector, horticulture skills, animal care, motor vehicle maintenance (provided at a local college) and construction, which includes bricklaying, painting and decorating, plumbing and electrical skills. All courses currently offered enable students to gain a Level 1 qualification.

- The Uttlesford Consortium is organised extremely well. A detailed protocol sets out clear roles and responsibilities for the different schools. An experienced former headteacher coordinates provision across the different sites and a 'single point of contact' in each school helps to ensure the smooth day-to-day running. A strategic board and an operations board, with representatives from each school, oversee the quality of provision. Each host school includes the observation of teaching and learning of this aspect of their work as part of its wider cycle of monitoring.
- Accommodation consists of a farm (with greenhouses), a construction facility and hair & beauty salon developed specifically to provide the new courses on the school sites, and a vehicle workshop at the college. The school-based provision was visited and offers a suitable working environment. It meets the requirements for the safeguarding, health and safety of students.
- Staff who work on the work-related courses are appropriately qualified in their particular fields and establish good relationships with students. Several have engaged in further training which has enhanced their skills and professional development.
- Students appreciate how the courses meet their particular interests and they feel well-prepared for making their particular choices. They take part in 'taster' sessions and are provided with helpful information on possible career routes. Parents are also involved in the selection process through briefing events, site visits and formal interviews.
- Good communication between the schools ensures that any problems that might arise are resolved quickly. Detailed information is shared which includes a 'pen portrait' of students' particular needs, their academic ability and previous attendance. Reports are completed on students' progress after each session and form part of a student's wider progress report.
- The work-related courses are timetabled to make sure all students are provided with a balanced curriculum which leads to a broad range of suitable qualifications, including GCSEs in English, mathematics and science and at least two other subjects. Almost all of the Year 11 students who completed work-related courses last year gained GCSE passes in English and mathematics and science. However, a small number of students report that due to timetable constraints they have stopped studying subjects they liked, in order to attend the work-related courses.
- Students speak highly of the courses and describe how much they look forward to attending. In the words of one, 'I can't wait for Thursday' (the day of the course), and another 'It's been uplifting'. Students particularly like learning through practical work and feel the courses are helping to prepare them for future work.

- The school has some evidence to show that individual students have improved their self-confidence and academic performance since attending work-related courses. However, information is not gathered and analysed to show progress of the group as a whole, or to show how students have improved their personal, social and employability skills. Almost all students who left in 2013 progressed to further training, study or apprenticeships linked to their work-related qualifications.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- implementing plans to measure the progress students make in developing their personal, social and employability skills
- monitoring the progress of students who attend work-related courses as a discrete group in order to evaluate the overall impact of the provision more effectively
- checking the timetabling arrangements to help limit occasions when students have to give up studying subjects they enjoy
- considering the provision of Level 2 courses to provide more challenge for the small number more capable students attending the work-related courses.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Redpath
Her Majesty's Inspector